

Eleven, Twelve, Thirteen by prinofpol

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Summary: In the warm orange light of his lamp, Will traces his fingers over the number inked into his skin. 013. It terrifies him and intrigues him at the same time. If she is Eleven, and Will is Thirteen - who, and where, is Twelve? (Ships/Stranger Things: Mike/Will/El, Lucas/Max, Steve/Nancy/Jonathan, Hopper/Joyce, Lucas/Max/Dustin. Ships/IT: Stan/Richie/Eddie, Ben/Beverly)

Eleven, Twelve, Thirteen

January, 1984

When Will wakes up, he feels like he is screaming, throat burning and lungs constricting, his jaw hanging open grotesquely, but... no sound comes out. Not even a whisper, a hint of a scream, just heady silence and the sense of nothing one gets when waking from a particularly realistic dream, only to discover you are still in your own bed. It's one of those nights where Will's dreams are more real than the world he wakes up in, like, deep down inside, some part of him – a real, physical part, not just his hope and light and innocence – was accidentally left behind in the Upside Down. Tonight's double feature included 'giant vine wriggling down my throat and making itself comfortable in my veins' and 'I think I actually died at one point, my heart definitely stopped beating, so why am I still in this awful, awful pain?' leaving Will lying in bed, gasping for breath with both hands pressed to his chest, and choking on a scream that refuses to come out.

It's supposed to be his first day back at school after everything, Doctor Owens deeming Will fit to be in a stressful environment like middle school again without having a complete meltdown. Will tends to disagree with that assessment, but being stuck in his house all day is getting tedious, and he wants to spend more time with his friends. His terrible night has rattled Will slightly, and that sets the mood for the rest of his day, his mind sliding in and out of his Upside Down flashbacks all day. Breakfast is thick, sticky slime and slugs sliding down his throat, his orange juice grey and rotten in the glass on the table. Jonathan drives him to school, and every shadow that crosses his face through the windshield is the Demogorgon looming up to drag him back down, or one of the other deformed creatures come for a bite while the Demogorgon is gone. He walks up to the school building and sees vines on every surface, sees the eyes of his classmates webbed over and blank, and his locker drips with fetid water, the stringy tendrils gluing the door shut.

"Will?" Lucas' voice breaks into his consciousness and everything snaps back to normal – no slime, no dead eyes, no monsters – so

quickly Will reels back on his heels as he turns to face his friend, seeing Mike and Dustin approaching them up the hallway as well. "Will, you okay, man?" Lucas asks quietly, setting a hand tentatively on Will's shoulder. "Your mom said to call her if anything is—"

Will smiles slowly, patting the hand on his shoulder. "I'm okay," he lies. He's been doing that a lot lately. "Just tired, I was so nervous last night that I didn't get much sleep." That is a believable excuse for the faint shadows under his eyes. At that moment, Mike and Dustin are close enough for Lucas' concerned attention to be turned on them, Lucas fussing over Mike's red-rimmed eyes and croaky voice – he and Karen had had yet another fight about taking down the blanket fort in the Wheelers' basement – and guilt bubbles in Will's gut when he is glad for the distraction, knowing he'd never be able to keep up his façade against Lucas' intensely worried stare for much longer.

"Mike, again?" Lucas sighs, not condescending, but genuinely questioning. He wraps an arm around Mike's shoulders and the four of them start to walk towards their first class.

Trailing a little behind the others, Will can't help the way his eyes trace over the side of Mike's face visible to him, Mike's lips drawn down at the corners and his cheeks that sickly shade of pale that comes after the flush from crying has faded, throwing his freckles into sharp relief. Mike's eyelashes are still wet, and when he squeezes his eyes shut briefly, Will thinks he sees a tear fall. Will clutches his history book to his chest. He knows why Mike has been so sad – has been told the stories of the mysterious girl with the shaved head and the psychic powers, who could flip trucks with her mind, who loved waffles, and who sacrificed herself to save her new friends from the Demogorgon – and he has his own ache of loss for Eleven, too. Will may not have known her the way the others, especially Mike, did, but sometimes, in his nightmares, she is there, holding his hand and telling him to hold on, hold on, *hold on* –

"Will!"

Startled, Will drops his book and dives after it with a squeak, scrambling on his knees and looking up at Dustin with wide eyes. He had walked straight past their classroom. A red flush rising high on his cheeks, Will gathers up the notes from Mike for the classes he had

missed that were tucked in the book, and starts to get back to his feet. A hand settles between his shoulder blades and shoves downwards, and suddenly he's winded and sprawled on the floor again, his own elbow jabbing painfully into his stomach and the hard corner of his book jabbing into his chin. "Ow," Will whines softly, blowing his fringe out of his eyes.

Cruel laughter sounds above him, and there are more hands on him suddenly, Mike kneeling beside Will and helping him roll onto his back, brows bowed down in a furious frown. Troy is laughing his ass off a few feet away, clearly very proud of himself for pushing Will over. "Welcome back, Zombie Boy!" Troy manages to get out between chuckles. "Don't think we're gonna let you off just because you got lost in the woods for a week!" Troy is the only person laughing, Will notices. All the other kids in the corridor are shooting the bully looks of barely-tolerant disdain, murmuring amongst themselves. Mike's hand curls into a fist on Will's chest, his shoulders shaking slightly under his striped sweater, the soft wool stretched down over his fingers.

"Shut up," Mike hisses, tilting his head back to glare at Troy so venomously Will almost doesn't recognise his usually mild-mannered best friend. It's a little scary, if Will is honest with himself (*not that you are particularly recognisable yourself, Byers, all grey and dead*) and he tries to tell Mike that it's okay, he's not hurt that badly. Mike ignores him, snapping, "Haven't you learned your lesson, dickhead? Do you need reminding about what happened on the cliff top?"

Behind them, Dustin and Lucas suck in sharp breaths, as Mike keeps his steely expression levelled on Troy, looking for all the world like his dark brown eyes are trying to bore holes right through Troy's head. Will is confused by Mike's words. He knows that Eleven once made Troy wet himself in front of the entire school, but the others had never mentioned anything about a confrontation with Troy on a cliff top. Troy, however, seems mortified by Mike's statement, his face going white and his eyes shooting around nervously, perhaps looking for someone, and he brushes his fingers over the cast he's still wearing on his right arm, fingers scratching on the plaster. He's scrambling for a comeback, clearly completely rattled. In the end, he settles for a trite, "Shut it, Wheeler," before he sulks off, shoulders

hunched and flinching at every bang of a locker door.

The mystery of the cliff top is enough to distract Will from his Upside Down flashes almost all day, even when he has a class all by himself in seventh period and the chalkboard starts to look a little cracked around the edges, the chalk dust flying from underneath the teacher's hand floating into the air and growing, growing, choking Will as he breathes it in. His eyes bug as he watches the girl beside him talk, and a slug calmly slides off her tongue and drops onto her desk with a wet squelch. Drawing is his only escape that lesson, and he fills an entire page with dirty browns and muted greens, using vibrant splashes of yellow to highlight the slug and the curve of her mouth, and thick black lines spiderweb from the spine like fingers. The bell ringing through the room sounds briefly like a saving grace, until Will remembers he has to walk out into the crowded corridor, alone, and hopes he can find his friends quickly before the darkness catches up to him. He really should give the rest of the party more credit, he thinks giddily, because there they are when he walks outside a few minutes after the rest of the class, arms wrapped around his books with his drawing sandwiched between his English notebook and his flannel shirt.

Dustin and Lucas are, predictably, arguing about something in heated voices, smacking each other's shoulders and waving their hands around ridiculously to illustrate whatever point each is trying to make. Will spares them an amused smile, happy that at least something is still normal after all this mess, and then his eyes slide automatically to Mike, who is now sporting a bruised and swollen eye with a self-satisfied smirk on his face. "What the *hell*, Mike?" Will squawks, sprinting the few feet between them and reaching up to ever so gently touch the red and purpling skin around Mike's left eye with his pencil-smudged fingers. "How did you manage to get a black eye between lunch and now?!"

Mike shrugs nonchalantly, actually looking quite pleased with himself and his new injury, and Dustin and Lucas cut their argument off just to start talking over each other as they regale Will with the story. "It was awesome!" Dustin exclaims, his eyes bright and his plastic teeth reflecting the fluorescent lights above him. "Mike had a bit of an issue in math, and Troy tried to corner him in the hallway

when he left the room-

"-He said he was going to pay Mike back for what El did to him!" Lucas interjects, grinning broadly. "And Mike just, like, *looked* at him, and-

"Troy growled and punched him and Mike took it like a champ!" Dustin crows, throwing his arms in the air triumphantly. "Then Mike just shoved him to the ground and told him to leave you alone or he'd see how Troy likes wetting himself!"

Lucas elbows Dustin, wanting to get his say in. "It was totally awesome, and Troy nearly cried he was so scared."

Rolling his eyes with a small smile, Mike says, "It wasn't that awesome."

Will allows himself a moment to feel all tingly inside at the idea of Mike standing up for him, specifically, before the confusion settles in. "Wait..." he says, brow furrowing. Somehow, even with the mention of Troy wetting himself, Will doesn't think they're talking about Troy's little 'accident'. "Did Eleven do something else to Troy?" he asks, both interested in hearing the story, and a little scared, because Eleven sounds like she could cause a lot of damage if she wanted to.

"Hell *yeah*, she did!" Dustin says enthusiastically. "She – oof!" Mike steps on his foot, and Dustin throws him a look of pure betrayal for interrupting what was about to be another epic tale of good versus Troy. "What the hell, Mike?" he whines, and Mike shoots him a pointed look. "Ooooh," Dustin breathes, eyes going wide before flashing Will a smile that looks more like a grimace. "Never mind."

Must be about the cliff top, Will rationalises, slightly hurt that his friends are apparently keeping something from him. He shakes the hurt off, sure they have a good reason for doing so, and reminding himself that he is doing the exact same thing: keeping secrets from his friends. "Well, thanks for defending me Mike," he murmurs, stepping a little closer so he can give Mike a one-armed hug around his books, which Mike happily returns, his forehead bumping against Will's temple familiarly. "But you don't have to get yourself beat up on my account."

Mike cuffs Will's shoulder affectionately and pulls out of the hug, shaking his head incredulously. "No one gets to talk shit about you, Byers," he says earnestly. "Never again." It's a nice sentiment, but Will has noticed already that Troy's sneered 'Zombie Boy' from earlier seems to have been picked up by the rest of the school, despite Troy's apparent decrease in popularity and fear-factor since November. "Now," Mike's tone shifts to a lighter, more jovial sound, and he flicks his thumb over his shoulder. "These two are bowing out of 'Help Will Study' tonight, so it's just gonna be you and me. Is that okay?" Mike suddenly looks a little hesitant, like Will won't want to hang out with him without the others there. Why would Mike be worried about that?

"Of course," Will replies, maybe a little too quick and eager, and he blushes hotly when Dustin smirks at him knowingly over Mike's shoulder.

The Wheeler's basement is a nice, warm change from the frigid breeze outside – it may be nearing the end of January, but the weather is still acting like it's the middle of December, and Will is pretty sure there's snow in the air – and he throws himself onto the couch with a little more force than necessary, burrowing into the quilt thrown haphazardly over the cushions with a contented murmur. This is the warmest he has been all day, and Will is finding it harder and harder to keep warm as the days trot on, constantly wrapping himself in layers and layers of clothing, always needing at least one extra jacket when he leaves the house. There's a faint giggle from somewhere near the stairs, and Will peeks out of his quilt cocoon to narrow his eyes at Mike, the taller boy flitting around straightening their Dungeons and Dragons table so that it's ready for the weekend (*this campaign is going to be great, Mike has been planning it for a week and he swears it will have a more satisfactory ending and less plot holes than the last few*) and emptying his bag onto the floor to shuffle through a pile of paper for the notes he needs to give Will. "You laughing at me, Wheeler?" Will asks, pretending to sulk.

"Never, Byers," Mike says, definitely laughing quietly from his spot on the floor. "Does the caterpillar want to join the rest of us on the ground so we can go over two weeks of math notes from last term?"

Groaning under his breath at the mention of his least favourite

subject, Will slides off the couch with the quilt still draped around him, and crawls over to sprawl at Mike's side, extracting a hand to pick up some of the notes. He wrinkles his nose. "Your handwriting is still terrible," he informs Mike, because Will is a good friend (*just a friend, always just a friend*) and Mike deserves to know that he writes like a drunk chicken. "It really, truly is a travesty." Will sighs theatrically. "And Nancy's handwriting is so beautiful..."

Mike grins and knocks his elbow against Will's shoulder. "Shut up, Byers, we can't all have flawless cursive," he laughs, and Will has to duck his head to hide a faint blush at that statement.

Pawing over notes in the Wheelers' basement and bantering with Mike almost makes Will feel normal, like everything that happened was the nightmare, and his actual nightmares are just bad dreams, and like maybe he can move on from it. They work through three pages of Mike's notes, talking quietly as Mike explains the formulas Will missed suffering through in class, and Will tries not to stare at Mike's pretty freckles too obviously. When they get to the eleventh problem on the page, Will sees Mike's fingers start to tremble a little, his face dropping slightly, and he keeps licking his lips like he wants to say something but doesn't know how. Will knows how Mike feels about the absent girl who saved them all (*he's not even jealous, that isn't an emotion in Will Byers' repertoire*) and his own heart aches for Mike's pain. He shuffles closer and hugs his friend, sits his chin on Mike's shoulder, and Mike nuzzles his nose into Will's hair as a small shudder rolls through him. They both look over to the small blanket fort still set up reverently in the corner. Mike's Supercomm is resting proudly in the centre of the pillow pile, and Will feels something heavy settle in his stomach at the thought of Mike sitting in there, desperately calling out for someone who never answers.

(He called for you in the Upside Down and you never answered, and now he's calling for the girl who gave herself up to save you, and she can't answer either, and it's all your fault...)

The question slips out without Will even noticing. "Mike, what happened on the cliff top?" Will doesn't realise he has even said anything until he feels Mike stiffen beside him. Glancing up at Mike, Will watches a range of emotions flicker over Mike's face, amplified by the high cheekbones and dark, soulful eyes. Fright. Guilt. Anger.

Shame. Sadness. "Mike?" Will whispers, concerned.

Mike breathes out slowly, until his throat whistles and spots of pink appear on the apples of his cheeks. His black eye is dark purple now, red veining out over his eyelid and the bridge of his nose, and Will knows it will be turning green and yellow by the end of the week. He almost wants to draw it, capture the colour progression forever, stark against Mike's pale skin. "We were looking for El," Mike says, voice thick. His eyes are closed now, because he knows that if he looks at anything – at Will and his big, green eyes, at the blanket fort with all its memories, or at anything else in the basement – he will start crying, *again*, and probably won't stop until he can't breathe and Nancy has to come and talk him back into calmness. "And we were up near Hawkins Falls, me and Dustin. That's when Troy and James found us." Mike can hear Will's mouth pop open in shock. "Troy wanted revenge for El making him piss himself. He had a knife."

A shocked gasp escapes Will, and he listens with rapt and horrified attention as Mike tells him about Troy holding Dustin at knifepoint and forcing Mike to jump off the cliff, and how Eleven had showed up just in time to pull Mike back over the edge, breaking Troy's arm to scare him away. Mike could have died, *would have died*, if Eleven hadn't been there. Will can see it so clearly in his mind's eye it makes him sick to the core: Mike's thin, lanky body smacking into the water's surface and sinking to the bottom of the lake, never to be seen again until it washed up into the same quarry that Will's fake body had been found in. Only, this time, it would be real, no matter how much Will screamed Mike's name. He can understand why his friends didn't want to tell him that particular anecdote about their adventures with Eleven, (*it's all your fault, it's all your fault, it's all your fault*) Mike would never have been in that situation if Will had defended himself better, had been stronger, had tried harder to get himself out of the Upside Down, had been able to put it all on the line for his friends (*just like Eleven did, in the end*).

Will spirals. He can hear Mike calling his name, can vaguely feel Mike tugging the quilt off him and trying to get him to respond, but Will can't move. He can't see, and he blacks out, right there in Mike's basement. Suddenly, he's back in the Upside Down. It's his nightmare all over again. No matter how hard he screams, sound refuses to

come out.

When he finally comes out of it, when he 'wakes up' from the living nightmare, Will is propped up in the bed in Hawkins Laboratory that he has become all too familiar with, his head hooked up to so many beeping machines he tears up in pain, the sounds piercing in his skull. Doctor Owens calls it 'an episode', says Will, quite probably, will have several more in the following months as he processes his trauma.

Will tips his head down onto his mother's shoulder at the news, and cries in her arms.

March, 1984

They all learn to tell the time by Mike's obsessive and depressive count of how many days that Eleven has been missing. He never says it outright, but they know he tries to call her on his Supercomm sometimes, hoping that maybe one day, he'll get an answer. Will half expects Lucas to call Mike out for it, and tell him he's being ridiculous – their arguments can flare up over the smallest thing lately, both of them emotionally compromised – and then Will berates himself for thinking so lowly of Lucas, who is hurting and missing Eleven too, blaming himself for not being able to defend his friends against the Demogorgon better. They all have their own way of counting the days. Will counts how many days it has been since he returned, how many days it has been since the life he had known before ended.

On day seventy-six, Will goes to bed as he does every night, hesitant and fearful of his own mattress, afraid that at any moment, the sheets – with their innocent Pac Man pattern and soft cotton finish – will turn into strangling fleshy vines and monster teeth to drag him back underground. He pulls his blankets up to his chin, rough wool scraping his neck, and then right up over his head as an afterthought, closing his eyes in the darkness in an effort to slow the rapid pounding of his heart as he wishes he had taken up Dustin's offer to stay the night, rather than insisting his friend biked home before it got dark (*so that Dustin didn't have to put up with all of Will's night time issues*) and sleep in his own bed rather than on Will's uncomfortable floor. Quietly, the record player is spinning in the background,

something guitar-heavy and lifted from Jonathan's collection, and Will thinks he should have turned it up before he got into bed. Maybe the loud music would drown out his racing thoughts and bury tonight's up and coming nightmare that Will can already sense lurking in the back of his mind. But, now that he is in bed, he doesn't want to get out, terrified that when he puts his feet down, he will feel leaves and decay instead of carpet and dirty clothes.

Zing.

Will jerks at the strange sensation, warmth shooting through his veins, and then the music starts to swell in volume, Will's heart skipping a beat in time with the drums, and he throws the covers off to see who could possibly be touching his player. He freezes, almost blinded by every single light in the room shining back at him – the lights that were off when he crawled into bed. The harder his heart beats, hammering against his ribs like it wants to hop right out and run away, the brighter the lights glow, until Will thinks the bulbs might just explode and shower him with paper-thin glass. His eyes dart around the room, but there is no one in sight.

Panting, Will flops back against the mattress, pressing his spine in to ground himself, and wills himself to calm down and go to sleep. Mike is tearing himself apart worrying about Eleven, and Will's general health and happiness, completely forgetting to look after himself in the process, and Will doesn't want to make it worse – Mike has been looking distressingly frayed around the edges lately, like if someone pulls one of his threads, he will fall apart completely – doesn't want to make Mike any less happy. Any less like Mike than he already is. Will closes his eyes against the still-shining lights, ignoring the red glow behind his eyelids and eventually drifting off to sleep with strange images of Mike and Eleven circling around in his head.

Jonathan is making breakfast in the morning, as usual – eggs and pancakes today, with an extra portion he hopes his mother doesn't notice, something special because he had woken up earlier than normal – when he hears Joyce shriek Will's name, the sound ripping from the middle of her diaphragm and stabbing Jonathan in the heart. It's the most tormenting sense of déjà vu, and Jonathan forgets about going back to bed when breakfast is ready, nearly putting his entire hand in the hot skillet as he scrambles to get to his mother,

calling out to her frantically around the burnt fingertips he has shoved in his mouth. "Mom?!" He careens around the corner from the hall and into Will's bedroom, skidding to a halt seconds away from crashing into Joyce's back where the woman is standing still as a statue in the doorway, her hands pressed to her cheeks like a Munch painting. Jonathan moves her aside with soft hands on her shoulders, and steps inside the room.

The first thing that hits him is the god-awful scent of burning plastic, his eyes immediately drawn to Will's prized record player. The platter is cracked in half and the slip mat burnt to a lump of splintered rubber, and the arm and needle have been blown off completely, faint tendrils of smoke rising out of the speakers. Black goo is dripping down onto the carpet in thick dollops, and the only reason Jonathan even realises that it's the remains of one of his Echo and the Bunnymen records is the paper label he sees still clinging to the spindle, curled and singed at the edges. Choking on a scream, Jonathan's wide eyes trail the puddle of melted vinyl to the rest of the floor, glittering in the sunlight from the open window with thousands of shards of glass, thin and tiny and absolutely everywhere. And, the worst thing of all, is that Will is nowhere to be seen, a trail of small, bloodied footprints crushing the glass further into the carpet leading from the side of his bed to the window, more red streaking the white frame and disappearing over the veranda, out into the back yard.

Wearing nothing but a ratty pair of sleep shorts, a stretched-out Bowie shirt, and fluffy, mismatched socks that possibly belong to Nancy Wheeler, Jonathan leaps across the room, out the window, and after the trail of footprints before Joyce can even utter another scream of her youngest child's name. Joyce is in such a state of shock she doesn't notice Steve Harrington, of all people, sneak out the back door from Jonathan's bedroom – barely dressed himself and looking mildly perturbed – get in his car, and chase Jonathan down before he gets seen in such a state. He brings the distraught boy back to the house and whips the burning food off the stove before the pan becomes unsalvageable, both Jonathan and Steve acting like Steve hadn't been there all morning, and most of the night, already. Both Byers are utterly beside themselves, so Steve closes Will's door carefully and makes them sit down in the living room, his own worry

barely held under a practised schooled-face of 'gotta keep calm, gotta keep calm' as he calls Hopper, and then the Wheelers, feeling that the entire group should know. Nancy promises to tell Mike, who Steve can hear in the background frantically asking his sister what's wrong with Will, before she hangs up with a soft, 'See you soon, Stevie.'

"Steve?" Joyce finally notices him, blinking her eyes for what feels like the first time since she pushed Will's door open that morning. "What are you doing here?" Jonathan and Steve share an awkward look over Joyce's head that feels hilariously out of place, given the current situation, but are saved from answering by the sound of approaching police sirens. "Hop!" Joyce nearly wails when the police chief throws the door open, and the Byers' living room becomes one big, half-dressed Find Will party, Hopper having only thrown on sweat pants and his jacket before leaving his house.

When Mike thinks back on the week that follows, many years later when the idea of Will disappearing doesn't make his entire body ice over and his heart thud audibly, he can only remember snaps of it, like someone had given him a View Finder and a disc of pictures. He can see himself and Nancy speeding to the Byers' house, almost hitting Lucas and Dustin, headed in the same direction on their bikes. He sees them all splitting into groups – adults, teenagers, and kids – and going out all day looking for Will, because it doesn't take them long to realise that Will hasn't been taken this time (*not at first, not yet*) he has actually gotten up and walked away, apparently of his own accord. Mike will remember someone – who, specifically, he never knew – bringing up the phrase 'sleep walking', and he will remember spending two entire days combing every inch of the wooded area surrounding Hawkins, searching and calling desperately for Will. It hurts. Mike will clearly remember spending the week feeling like someone punched him in the stomach, kicked him in the chest, and then bashed his head into a wall. He barely manages to get through his nightly calls to Eleven over his Supercomm.

He calls her bawling the first night Will was gone, and he could have sworn he felt someone touching his back, but he knows that was just a cruel joke in the form of wishful thinking. Eleven wasn't there, but he knows that if she was still there with them, she would have been able to find Will for them. She did it once, and Mike knows that she

can do it again.

The third day will stand out more clearly than the others, when Mike remembers it.

At dawn, after the entire house had crashed into sleep, exhausted from forty-eight hours of fruitless searching, Mike groggily pulls himself out of the makeshift bed he had constructed for himself on the freshly-vacuumed floor of Will's room, ready to make his way either to the bathroom or outside to scream, and immediately trips over Dustin. The sudden change of direction sends his not-quite-awake-yet body tumbling onto Will's bed, which no one has dared touch since Joyce discovered Will missing except to clean the glass off. His hip knocks against the post at the end, and Mike lies there groaning sleepily in pain for a minute before Lucas grumbles at him to shut up, one dark hand emerging from the pile of blankets Lucas is half-sharing with, half-fighting Dustin for, swatting at Mike's ankle. Mike grunts and shuffles away from the assault, pulling himself further onto Will's bed, misjudging the width of the mattress and over-balancing his lanky body, tipping himself off the other side of the bed, and the floor is suddenly rushing up to say hello to his face.

"Ow," Mike whines, cheek smashed into the carpet and too tired to move much, trying to ignore his screaming bladder. He brings a hand down to try and lever himself back onto the bed, and he puts it on a wad of paper sticking out from under the blanket that had been haphazardly thrown off the side of the bed. Random pens and papers on Will Byers' bedroom floor wasn't that unusual (*why does Mike know what the common state of Will's room is?*) because Will had been drawing more and more lately, his art one of his only escapes from the trauma Mike knows his friend has been trying to hide from them. But there are words on these pages, big, bold, scrawled words that seem to be yelling, 'look at me! here I am! what took you so long to notice me!' at Mike. He fumbles, tries to pull the paper out while his hand is still on top of it, and it rips in half while Mike somersaults off the bed inelegantly, landing on his back with a gasp and a thud that has Dustin and Lucas scrambling out of the one blanket they've ended up wrapped in.

"Mike!" Dustin whispers, annoyed at being woken up so early, crawling around the bed to find Mike. "What the hell?"

Moaning, Mike lets Lucas help him into a sitting position, and then he extracts the two halves of the papers, and a few others he spots with the same writing on them. "Guys, look," he breathes, laying the ripped page out before the three of them. "I think Will did these before he left."

"How could you possibly know that?" Lucas slurs, head leaning heavily on Mike's shoulder tiredly.

Dustin reaches around Mike to thump Lucas as Mike tosses Lucas a reproachful glare, his sleep-soft cheeks going slightly pink. He really doesn't want to explain that he knows these are new because he has every inch of Will's room memorised for some strange reason that Mike isn't fully prepared to internally explore at the moment. "Shut up," Dustin says smartly, saving Mike the trouble.

Not in the mood to put up with one of their stupid play-fights this early in the morning, and after so little sleep and too much worrying, Mike talks loudly in the hopes that they'll listen to him without question. "Just look at these. Look at what they say."

The ripped page, held lightly together by Mike's fingers, and all the other pieces of paper below it in the stack, are covered in thick purple words – the purple marker lying a few feet away from the bed, its nib smashed to a fluffy nub – running together and overlapping. Some pages are almost a solid block of purple ink, the three boys squinting to make out the words.

TREE. DOOR. PHONE. SHED. GUN. LIGHT. TREE. DOOR. PHONE. SHED. GUN. LIGHT. TREE. DOOR. PHONE. SHED. GUN. LIGHT. TREE. DOOR. PHONE. SHED. GUN. LIGHT.

Over and over, the six words repeat, Mike flipping the pages as their confused frowns get more pronounced. At some point, the purple marker must have died, and the pages start sporting bright orange words, Lucas unearthing an equally destroyed orange highlighter, its casing warped, from under Will's nightstand. "The words are different," Dustin breathes, touching the first page with orange on it with a shaking hand. "Look, the purple stops and the words change."

TREE. DOOR. PHONE. SHED. GUN. LIGHT. DARK. SCARED. RUN.

HIDE. MOM. CASTLE. ELEVEN. MONSTER. DEAD.

Mike flips through the orange pages, eyes catching repeatedly on one particular word.

DARK. SCARED. RUN. HIDE. MOM. CASTLE. ELEVEN. MONSTER. DEAD. DARK. SCARED. RUN. HIDE. MOM. CASTLE. ELEVEN. MONSTER. DEAD. DARK. SCARED. RUN. HIDE. MOM. CASTLE. ELEVEN. MONSTER. DEAD. DARK. SCARED. RUN. HIDE. MOM. CASTLE. ELEVEN. MONSTER. DEAD.

"What does it mean?" Mike asks, feeling tears well up in his eyes at the thought of what could have possibly been going through Will's head at the time to prompt him to write these things. "Eleven"? Why does it say 'dead'?"

Dustin shakes his head emphatically. "I don't know, I do not know."

Lurching forwards, Lucas gathers up all the papers, trying not to scrunch them too badly. "We have to show the others, maybe Jonathan or Mrs Byers will know what it is." He rubs the back of his head worriedly. "Maybe it's something he's talked about with Doctor Owens?"

Joyce and Hopper are smoking at the kitchen table, giant mugs of untouched and stone-cold coffee in front of them, at half five in the morning when the three youngest occupants of the house burst out of Will's room in a tangled mess of jumbled words and too much energy, considering Hopper and Steve had had to carry Dustin and Mike inside the night before, Lucas tripping and trailing behind Nancy as she made her way into Jonathan's room. Hopper barely represses a groan and stubs out his smoke in the ashtray by his elbow, wincing when he takes a gulp of his coffee and the horribly cold liquid splashes over his tongue. The three boys roll to a stop right beside the adults, papers and blankets wafting off them like shed skin. Someone is saying, 'Look at what we found,' and someone else is saying, 'Does this mean anything to you?' and it's too much sound, Joyce reeling back in her chair as Hopper raises his hands in defence against the barrage of sound.

"One at a time!" Hopper says sharply, almost cracking a smile at the

repetition of history, but now is definitely not the time for humour. "One. At. A. Time." He doesn't even have to point at Mike this time to prompt the boy into speaking. He quickly explains about the papers with minimal interruptions from the other two, and then holds up a few sheets to show the adults. Hopper shakes his head; he has never seen or heard anything like what is splashed across the papers; but Joyce has that look on her face like she's had an epiphany. "Joyce?" he murmurs, putting his hand on her knee to get her attention.

She jumps, that startled-rabbit look settling back into her features like it never left all those months ago, and her hands scramble for the pages, cigarette sticking out between two fingers. Hopper is a little afraid she might set the paper on fire as she closes her hands around them, pulling them in close and staring at Will's crazy scrawl with wide eyes, her mouth working silently, as if she wants to say something but the words refuse to come out. "This is the night Will was taken," she gets out eventually, showing them an all-purple page. "He told me that nearly ran into a tree on his bike before he reached the house, the Demogorgon unlocked the door from the outside, and he tried to ring for help on the phone. But, when no one answered, he hid in the shed, and tried to use the gun to defend himself." Joyce gulps, eyes flicking around nervously as she points at one of the 'LIGHTS' on the page. "He told Doctor Owens that right before it took him, the light in the shed glowed so bright he thought it had blinded him."

Mike lets out a sob-like sound, trying to smother it in the sleeve of his jumper. His big brown eyes are swimming with pain, and Dustin and Lucas don't look any better. "What about the other words?" Lucas asks, putting his arm around Mike's shoulders comfortingly. "The orange ones?"

"I don't know," Joyce stammers, tears starting to brim in her own eyes. "But maybe it's something he told Doctor Owens?" She turns her gaze to Hopper as she says it, suddenly questioning. "Maybe we should...?"

He's nodding before she has even finished speaking. "We'll go up there today, the kids can keep looking up by the quarry, we didn't get there yesterday."

Plan of action decided, Mike gets sent into Jonathan's room to wake the three teens as Dustin helps make breakfast and Lucas goes poking through Will's room in case any more clues to the missing boy's whereabouts unearth themselves. Tugging his blanket around his shoulders, Mike shuffles up the hall and knocks on Jonathan's door, pushing it open with his toe when he gets no answer other than a muffled snore. He pauses on the threshold, blinking at the sight of Steve spread horizontally across the floor at the foot of Jonathan's bed, pillows and blankets tucked around him as a makeshift palette, contentedly snoring away. Jonathan and Nancy are on the floor too, Jonathan's head on Steve's stomach where he's lying half-curved on his side, Nancy wedged into the gap between them, her forehead pressed to Jonathan's and her hands fisted in the hem of Steve's shirt. Mike wrinkles his nose (*why are you making that face when you've had a dream just like that with two other people?*) and raps his knuckles on the wall obnoxiously until Jonathan jolts awake so suddenly he inadvertently wakes the other two up as well. "Quit being gross and come help us find Will," Mike mutters, rolling his eyes, because he's the little brother and it's in his job description to be disgusted by his sister's boyfriend. Boyfriends? Whatever. People she's non-platonically cuddling with on the floor.

Mike battles off an unwanted bout of jealousy all the way back into the kitchen.

His memories of that week peter out again after that. They found nothing else that day, nor the day after, and Joyce and Hopper returned from Hawkins Laboratory frustrated and empty handed. "They know something," Hopper keeps insisting, smoking his way through an entire pack of cigarettes by the end of the fifth day. He bangs his fist on the table suddenly, and everyone in the room jumps. "I know they know where he is!" And so Hopper leaves again, headed back for the Lab, and Mike continues to quietly fall apart, still venturing out with Dustin and Lucas and their bikes in the hopes that they might just stumble across Will in the woods. Steve, Nancy, and Jonathan take Steve's car all the way out to the town limits, just in case, returning with a worried-to-tears Jonathan and no Will.

Day six is nothing more than a blank slate with the words, 'Will, where are you?' scratched on it. Mike knows he called Eleven at the

end of each previous day, but he doesn't recall doing it, what he did, or said to her beyond the count of the day and muffled sobs of Will's name. At the end of the sixth day, still stuck on square one and a half, the eight of them retire to bed. Dustin and Lucas had already fallen asleep on the Byers' couch, much to Hopper's dismay at losing his bed for the last five nights (*Joyce takes pity on him and lets him sleep on her floor*), so Mike creeps into Will's room alone, makes his call to Eleven from the floor because he still doesn't feel right sleeping on Will's bed, and wraps himself up in one of Will's blankets as he drifts off.

In the middle of the night, when Mike is caught in a dreamless sleep, the window slides open, small feet appearing on the sill. Said feet shuffling across the floor rouse Mike, and he blinks blearily in the darkness, a shadow moving across the room and climbing into Will's bed. Mike tries to speak, but his throat won't work, and he fights his blanket to stand, tripping and stumbling to the bookshelf where Mike's torch is lying in a manoeuvre that takes him several minutes longer than it should have. He fumbles to turn it on and shine the beam around the room. A whinge of complaint is emitted from the bundle of covers that has made itself comfortable in Will's bed when the light lands on it, dirt-covered hands poking out as if trying to wave the torch beam away, and Mike thinks he might have died and gone to heaven when Will Byers' head appears out of the quilt.

"Mike?" Will croaks, rubbing at his eyes. His hair is wild, leaves and twigs sticking out of the tangled mess like an earthy crown. "What are you doing in my room? It's late." Mike still can't get words out. Will has dirt streaked all down his face and neck. "Did Dustin tell you I was here by myself? Because you guys know that I can make it through a night on my own, right? I'm not going to break if you – Mike?" He's staring at Mike with confusion shining in his green eyes. "Mike, are you okay?"

The torch clatters to the floor, and Mike shrieks loudly, unable to control his voice. He claps his hands over his mouth and drops to his knees, staring at Will with huge eyes. Mike doesn't even know when he starts crying, but suddenly his face is wet with hot, salty tears.

Will is back, and he doesn't even realise that he's been missing.

October, 1984

Lips still tingling from where they had pressed against Mike's cheek, Will walks out of the Wheelers' house and hops onto his bike with steely determination, peddling down the road and back towards his house. He knows his mother will kill him when she finds out he left the house he was supposed to be sleeping at, by himself, in the middle of the night. Skirting Mirkwood (*Doctor Owens thinks that Will should try riding Mirkwood again, but that is never going to happen*) and taking the new route he had come up with – which is lined by large redwoods, so he is tentatively nick-naming it Endor – he rides right past his house, slowing down and ducking his head to avoid being seen by Steve and Nancy, cuddled together on the porch swing as Jonathan snaps some pictures of them, and starts heading down the familiar track to Castle Byers. He can't stand seeing Mike so depressed and out of it anymore – Will has to do something about it. That last call to Eleven had been so painful for Will to witness (*he can't imagine how Eleven must have felt, knowing that she was watching, listening*), Mike silently falling apart from the inside as he called out to the girl he misses so sorely, and Will wishes that he had never agreed to spend the night at Mike's.

He stops and leans his bike against the side of the little hut, crawling under the sheet door and fumbling around in the dark for the box of matches so he can light the small lamp he has stashed away in Castle Byers. Will carefully carries the lamp over to the palette of blankets and pillows, sitting down and placing it at his feet – he needs to be alone for this idea to work, he won't be able to concentrate with Mike sitting *right there*, those beautiful brown eyes focused solely on Will.

Having heard every single detail of Eleven's week with Mike and his other friends – Dustin had gladly filled in the gaps after Will's episode over the clifftop story, tired of hiding things from the boy – Will knows of one guaranteed way of finding Eleven. He has to find his way into the *mind place*, that's what Eleven had called it. With a salt bath out of the question, Will so terrified of suffocation he doesn't think he'll ever be able to get into a normal bath ever again, let alone a salt bath he has to completely submerge himself in, he has been trying to figure out a way of accessing that silent, endless plain of darkness and black water again. If Will is being honest with himself,

he wants to find Eleven for more than just salvaging whatever shreds of Mike's happiness still remain.

He wants answers.

Without even thinking about it, Will rolls up his left sleeve. He's been wearing long sleeves every waking moment now since March, finding excuse after excuse – particularly hard during the summer months, but he managed it – to never expose his arms to anyone. Everyone worries over him so much that Will couldn't possibly bare to burden them anymore, and so he has been content to keep this secret until he finds the one person who would understand, would know what to do about his... *situation*.

Will scratches idly at his left arm, eyes flicking down to his biggest secret.

He told everyone – his mom, Jonathan, Doctor Owens, Mike – that he didn't remember a thing from that week in March when he went missing. And that is partially true. He remembers Eleven, seeing her in that place he is almost convinced that he made up, but is now trying to reach, but Will has no memory of writing all those pages of words, leaving his room, or climbing back through the window, just of all his electronics going haywire right before the lights exploded, and of waking up to an emotionally wrecked Mike crouched on his floor like a wounded dog.

He has a vague recollection of the woods, his feet stinging on the twigs and leaves as he walked somewhere, like it happened to someone else, not to him, and she just heard the story about it. He remembers the bright lights of the lab, the electrical buzzing all around him. The pain in his arm, never mind its briefness, stands out at the clearest memory from the entire night, and he brushes his fingers over that spot now. Will can recall blurry flashes of machinery and needle pokes and a warm *zing* in his entire body immediately followed by all the lights flashing and the annoying machines bursting into flames. And then... the cool slide of his sheets and the familiar softness of his mattress.

In the warm orange light of his lamp, Will traces his fingers over the number inked into his skin. 013. It terrifies him and intrigues him at

the same time.

Allowing himself a moment of reflection (*if she is Eleven, and he is Thirteen, who and where is Twelve?*) Will shakes himself and sets about putting his, admittedly, shaky plan into action. He needs to render himself senseless in a way that won't send him spiralling into a panic attack in a place so isolated and far away from someone who could help pull him out of it. He has a pair of Jonathan's old headphones, the padded muffs sufficiently cutting sound off once Will has adjusted the head band, and he finds a scarf mixed in with his blankets, tying it around his eyes before lying down, careful not to kick his lamp over.

The sensation is almost relaxing, not being able to see or hear as Will sinks into the meagre warmth of his blankets and the big, soft jacket he's wearing. He empties his mind as much as he possibly can, fighting back the fear and the memories and the trauma, and he focuses on *her*. The girl he has only met twice, and never when the two are in the same reality. He pictures her shaggy hair and soulful eyes and her small, warm hands, strong and offering him unselfish comfort in his darkest hour. "Where are you, Eleven?" he whispers to no one, squeezing his eyes shut against his makeshift blindfold in the hopes that will help.

Minutes later, when he opens his eyes, Will is surrounded by calm, still blackness, cold water pooling around his ankles as he stands in the *mind place*. He gasps, stumbling a few steps backwards. "Oh my god, it worked!" he exclaims, patting his body down. "It worked, holy shit."

Now. He has to find Eleven.